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project humanities helps ASU and the community reflect on the big questions

By Tracy Mueller
It's a simple question, the conversational bedrock of blind dates and the first day of class. At first glance, it seems to tread dangerously close to small talk. But when you really think about it, the answer to that question reveals a great deal about who each of us is.

“It’s a way of funneling down and connecting with people,” says Neal Lester, dean of humanities and an English professor in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. “Whether it’s where you went to school or the neighborhood you lived in, place is fundamental to how we connect and how we define ourselves.”

Lester thinks place is so important that the committee he headed chose it as the theme for the inaugural year of Project Humanities, a university-wide initiative that aims to demystify the humanities and highlight its contributions to society. Launched in February, Project Humanities has hosted scholarly lectures, conferences, book readings and discussions, film series, poetry readings, art exhibits, and writing contests.

In a time when many humanities programs across the country are facing budget cuts and identity crises, ASU is attempting to ensure the field is seen as nothing less than essential.

In some circles, humanities has a reputation of being sequestered from the real world – a common stereotype from the field is that of a scholar sitting in a dusty library, doing research that nobody will read or care about. However, the notion that the humanities exist separate from the rest of the world is flawed, asserts Lester.

“Everybody on some level is trying to make sense of what it means to live on the planet,” Lester says. “And how we make sense, how we question, how we determine significance is the purview of the humanities, whether it’s interpreting data or saying a prayer or telling a story or resolving conflict.”

So when an airplane hits a pocket of turbulence and the seats start shaking and a passenger reaches out to grab the stranger’s hand next to her, that’s a humanities experience, Lester explains. It’s also a humanities experience when you see a great movie and want to talk to someone about it, when your car breaks down on the side of the road and another driver stops to offer assistance, or when a doctor compassionately explains treatment options to a patient who has just learned he has cancer.

“A humanities experience is when we somehow connect to a larger world and see ourselves not as an island, but connected to other people, working toward some common good,” Lester says. “So it’s not about the real world or humanities, because humanities is the real world.”
Project Humanities is housed in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, but the initiative aims to connect ASU faculty, staff, students, alumni and community members throughout and beyond the confines of the university’s four campuses. It’s an approach that reflects the interdisciplinary perspective of humanities, as well as the reality of some of the biggest challenges the world faces today – such as immigration, religious conflict and creating a sustainable way of life. Resolving complex situations is something with which those working in the humanities are experienced.

“These are very complex questions, and if we want to arrive at complex answers that befit the problem, then we have to bring together different perspectives,” says Linda Lederman, dean of social sciences and a professor of health communication who has attended Project Humanities events. “I think this is ASU at its best: the ability to have porous boundaries between disciplines and encourage people to communicate outside their areas. It’s one more way of saying that we don’t want structures to get in the way of working towards smarter solutions.”
Paul LePore, associate dean for student and academic programs in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, oversees student involvement in Project Humanities and agrees that exposure to multiple fields is important.

“Our goal is to create educated citizens. It’s also to make sure that we have people who are good biology majors and economics majors and historians,” LePore says. “But our goal is also for people to contribute to the wider social good and to provide those opportunities to reflect, to think and to communicate with others.”

It’s also, he points out, one of the great assets of a university campus.

“The humanities include a wonderfully reflective set of questions about the fundamental nature of who we are as people, who we are as a society,” LePore says. “College allows folks the opportunity to really question who they are and where they’re going. I think the humanities and the types of questions it looks at are a wonderful part of that human endeavor.”

Reflective questions anchored in a humanities perspective served as the basis for an interactive event promoting the launch of Project Humanities in February. Students painted large plywood sandwich boards with questions such as “What tools adjust your moral compass?” and “Is your tattoo your philosophy of life?” The signs were placed around campus,
and passersby were invited to paint their own answers in response. The first two participants were a pair of engineering students, a sure indication that the humanities and the sciences don’t have to exist in separate spheres. Jennifer Potter, a 2011 ASU graduate who worked with LePore on promoting student involvement with Project Humanities, says connecting to people with different backgrounds – whether the difference is what their major is or what home country they hail from – is part of what she loves about the university.

“People come to ASU from all over the world, with the common thread of we’re Sun Devils,” Potter says. “It’s getting to know people beyond the Sun Devil part.”

Potter was part of a group of students who helped plan an event called “Humanities through the Senses,” in which they challenged people to think about meaning and connection using the five senses.

“Think about the impact a beautiful sunset has and the visual imagery that provides,” LePore says. “The connection we have to sound or touch or other ways to experience the world. We wanted to have folks experience that as part of reflecting on what the humanities provide us.”

The students invited people to explore the sense of touch by leaving a gold paint handprint on black fabric, reminiscent of the Project Humanities handprint logo. People read poetry in front of the Memorial Union and offered their thoughts on what ASU tastes like (“Dirt,” “Hot Cheetos,” and “Victory” were a few of the submissions). And students catalogued the soundtrack of ASU by asking people what they were listening to on their iPods.

For Potter, her involvement with events like “Humanities through the Senses” was just as important to her education as her psychology and sociology classes.

“I realized humanities was more than just a major, it is part of life,” Potter says. “It’s important to understand those differences between people, and when you do that, you’re one step closer to understanding someone’s way of life.”

Assembling an all-star cast

One of the goals of Project Humanities during its inaugural year has been to show the field’s vibrancy, and an all-star slate of guest speakers has helped make that happen. Native American writer and filmmaker Sherman Alexie (screenwriter for the film “Smoke Signals” and author of “The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven,” a book of short stories) spoke to a full house at the Tempe Center for the Arts during the...
project’s launch week. Jim Leach, the chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and Rosemary Feal, the executive director of the Modern Language Association, each made appearances.

“People were there (at the launch) who wouldn’t ordinarily come to an ASU event,” Lester says. “People came out buzzing about it.”

At the end of the spring semester, amidst the frenzy of final exams, more than 500 people lined the walls and jostled for spots on the floor of Neeb Hall to listen to noted activist and scholar Angela Davis speak about prison reform. Davis, who spent 18 months in prison in the late 1960s and early 1970s, has taught at Vassar College, UCLA and Stanford and is deeply involved in social justice efforts relating to the prison industry. “Meeting you was on my bucket list,” one participant reportedly told Davis, who received multiple standing ovations.

“These moments mattered to folks at ASU and across the Valley in profound ways,” Lester explained.

The Project Humanities committee measures the success of their initiative based partly on the diversity of their new partners and audiences, including faculty, student, alumni and staff involvement, as well as through connections to groups including the Black Board of Directors, the Mayo Clinic Center for Humanities in Medicine, the Chandler Jewish Community Center and Changing Hands Bookstore in Tempe. The project’s website, Facebook page, Twitter account and YouTube channels all are gaining steadily an audience, extending the initiative’s reach to digital communities.

The enthusiastic response to Project Humanities is evidence of the power humanities has to move people, according to Elizabeth Capaldi, executive vice president and provost of the university. In an editorial in the Arizona Republic announcing the project, Capaldi put it this way: “The humanities challenge students to confront their own experiences, beliefs and thoughts. A deepening of their capacity to understand themselves and each other results. From this deepened capacity will come new imaginative approaches to not only today’s pressing concerns, but those we cannot even conceive.”

Buoyed by support from President Michael Crow and his vision for ASU as a “New American University” that is socially embedded and globally engaged – both key hallmarks of the humanities – Lester and his colleagues are working to expand the programming and activities of Project Humanities during its second year to incorporate other fields, such as business, sports and music.

Eager to build on the groundwork that’s been laid, Lester hopes to find external support to continue Project Humanities beyond the first two years of university funding.

LePore, inspired by that first sign painting event that encouraged people to reflect on important questions, believes it simply makes sense for this to be part of the ASU experience. “They might not all have stopped to paint, but they stopped to think,” he asserted. “It gets people thinking about different ways to experience their own lives, which is hopefully what a campus is about. Universities should be full of transformative moments.”

Tracy Mueller is a Tucson-based freelance writer.